

‘Mums and Dads Forever’: A Cooperative Parenting Initiative

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This paper reports on an innovative cooperative parenting education and support initiative being piloted by Anglicare in Perth in Western Australia.

Introduction

The Australian *Family Law Reform Act 1995* enshrines the vision of continuing parental responsibility and involvement in post-divorce families (Murphy, 1999; Sheehan and Fehlberg, 2000). However for many separated couples, the concept of cooperative, let alone joint, parenting is not only overwhelming but is often rejected outright as an impossible suggestion.

The project reported in this paper is one of three pilot programmes being conducted in Australia under the Federal Attorney General’s Department *Contact Orders Pilot* initiative. The projects are funded through the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services. The other two pilots are being conducted by UniFam in Sydney, and Relationships Australia in Tasmania.

The aim of the pilots is to reduce the number of parents (usually non-resident) using the Family Court process to resolve breaches of ‘Contact Orders’. Although this litigious group represents only a small percentage of the cases before the Family Courts, they consume disproportionate amounts of Court time and resources, often without any durable long-term resolution. The resulting instability often has deleterious effects on the children of the relationship.

This project was conceived as a way of:

- supporting separated parents by teaching them communication and relationship-management skills,
- facilitating and encouraging a cooperative post-separation parenting relationship with a former partner, and
- reducing the reliance on the Family Court (of Western Australia) to resolve disputes concerning Contact Orders.

Definition

In the context of the Anglicare programme, the term ‘cooperative parenting’ is used rather than ‘co-parenting’ – this latter term can be interpreted as either ‘joint parenting’ or ‘parenting with a degree of agreement’. We are seeking to encourage the parents to work together in a cooperative manner in the best interests of their children. By encouraging parents to seek their own resolution to parenting issues, this programme is also seeking vicarious long-term stable outcomes for their children.

The Anglicare Programme

The programme was conceptualised as a series of progressively interconnected units, with participants moving through them at differing rates depending on their post-separation adjustment. The five components of the programme are:

- a three-hour general Information Forum,
- an ‘intake’ interview to assess readiness for group work,
- up to four one-hour individual counselling sessions,
- a six-week workshop programme, and
- mediation on request.

Although we originally intended to run children's groups, logistical constraints have precluded us pursuing this goal. Instead, we have referred a number of parents to other agencies which offer children's support services.

We have found the Information Forums difficult to schedule. Their timing and presentation in the central city area proved problematic in terms of access, particularly for those parents who could not get time off work. In order to reach a wider audience, we are currently looking at running the forums in suburban community centres both during the day and in the evenings.

The counselling support and mediation services are integral to the parental group workshop process, and it is the preliminary results of the evaluation of this 'triage' approach which are reported in this paper. All services are provided free of charge, with the only condition being that participants provide as much feedback as possible so that we can fully document and evaluate this pilot programme.

Evaluation Framework

The evaluation framework was incorporated in all facets of the programme planning. We have used Stufflebeam's (1983) CIPP approach for educational programme evaluation. This approach considers the Context, Inputs, Process, and Product elements of the programme in order not only to determine outcomes but also to identify changes necessary to address the needs of the participants.

We have supplemented this educational evaluation framework with Rapp and Poertner's (1988) model, which emphasises placing the client at the centre of the programme and allowing the participants to determine the outcomes which are specific to their needs. Social work evaluation literature (Cheetham, Fuller, McIvor and Petch, 1992) suggests that such a client centred approach is particularly relevant in this type of programme which continues to evolve.

A number of methods of data collection were utilised:

- weekly participant feedback from the workshop groups,
- weekly assessment of each workshop by the facilitators,
- a final workshop evaluation by the participants at the end of each workshop group,
- follow-up interviews with participants,
- case studies of participants to assess their progress during their involvement with the programme, and
- discussions with other stakeholders (such as the Family Court).

All participants in the workshops have an 'intake' interview to assess their readiness for group-work. Prior to attending their first group, the participants complete the Myers Briggs Type Indicator [MBTI] test (Myers Briggs, McCaulley, Quenk and Hammer, 1998).

The results of the MBTI tests are used not only to discuss individual differences and different approaches to problem-solving and communication during individual counselling sessions but also to divide and sub-group workshop participants for detailed discussions and problem-solving tasks during the workshops.

The Process and the Product

Over a hundred people have been referred to the programme. For some of these people, the initial contact discussion is sufficient for them to stabilise their particular situation. Other people have found that the three-hour forum satisfies their immediate needs. One young mother's reaction exemplifies such an outcome:

"The realisation (and confirmation from the other people present) that I was not responsible for my four-year old brushing her teeth while she was with her father was such a liberation – all sorts of things fell into place when I realised that I could not control what was happening in his house. I felt really free."

We have completed four six-week workshops of two hours each week. A total of thirty-three people have participated in these four groups. Notwithstanding their acknowledged reticence at attending such groups, we have been surprised by the number of men who have participated in the programme (23 men and 10 women). However, since the majority (about 80%) of non-resident parents (and hence contact parents) are men (Murphy, 1999) and a central theme of the programme is seeking to resolve contact issues, the disparity in gender participation is understandable.

Half of the participants in the groups were referred to the programme by the Family Court of Western Australia. Many had been separated for less than twelve months, and all had difficulties establishing a cooperative parenting relationship with their former partner.

The first workshop group consisted of only male participants, with two female facilitators. Although the men agreed that the group was successful, the formative evaluation suggested that mixed gender groups with both a male and a female facilitator might be more beneficial. All subsequent groups have been conducted using this format.

A significant advantage of this gender mix has been the ability of the two genders to hear another point of view from someone with whom there is no emotional bond but who is in a similar position to their former partner. Thus issues which might well provoke angry exchanges between former partners are discussed in a more objective (and accepting) fashion. Many participants have commented on the value that they have gained from this aspect of the groups. Two of the participants commented in their workshop evaluations:

“Just hearing how some of the women felt about things that were remarkably similar to what my ex-partner and I were trying to sort out was very useful – sobering, really. I thought I was doing the right thing, but I realised I wasn’t helping the kids at all.”

“It was good to hear a man’s point of view from someone I wasn’t arguing with.”

The content and sequence of the workshops differed in each of the first three groups while we sought to identify a sequence of topic presentations with which the participants could engage as being relevant to them. A significant ‘learning’ has been the realisation that increasing the opportunities for the participants to talk to one another enhances their appreciation of the different strategies, options, and approaches presented by the facilitators and other group members. Therefore, we make a conscious effort to break the participants into pairs or sub-groups at least twice during each of the first four workshops so the people leave the group feeling as though they have had an opportunity to be heard. Many of these pairings are ‘contrived’ (using the MBTI profiles), so participants become aware of the significance and importance of individual differences.

An advantage of a pilot programme is that new formats can be explored. For instance, in the first two workshops series, the impact of divorce on children was not raised specifically until the third or fourth week. This meant that participants tended to focus on adult separation-related issues rather than parenting-related issues. In contrast, we began the third workshop with an examination of the impact of separation on children using the video produced by the Attorney-General’s Department. This approach immediately focussed the group on the idea that the children are their priority concern, and this focus was maintained throughout the third workshop. We are currently replicating this approach with the fourth workshop to confirm whether we have achieved a near-optimum presentation format.

The six-weekly workshops examine topics such as the effect of parental separation on children, the children’s reactions, individual differences and personality traits, the imprint of ‘family of origin’, issues of grief and loss in relationships, different methods of communication, and differing parenting styles. We allocate time during the second week to identifying the ‘ten most contentious issues’ for the workshop members, and use these throughout the remainder of the course as the basis for both small-group and whole-group discussion of possible strategies and approaches to addressing these issues.

A significant revelation for participants during this process is that it is possible (indeed, almost inevitable) for people to approach the same issue from different perspectives — and none of the approaches is wrong.

By the end of the course, almost all participants have realised that anger is the most effective obstacle to creativity, problem-solving, and establishing any form of rapport with their former partner. We therefore encourage participants to share ideas of how this *rapprochement* might be managed more positively. There is considerable emphasis on practical approaches to conflict resolution throughout each workshop.

Without exception, all participants have agreed that – despite their difficulties with a former partner – they need to be “as good a parent as they can be” in their new circumstances, and to accept that their children can simultaneously love both parents.

The formative evaluation forms from the workshops are analysed by the facilitators on completion of each week in order to identify strengths and weaknesses in the presentation, or content. Participants’ requests for further information are noted and included when planning for the next workshop. More than half of the participants reported that they had learned something relevant each week which they thought would make a difference in managing the complex relationships of post-separation families.

The majority of the participants have evaluated the workshops as being beneficial and enabling them to alter at least one significant aspect of their relationship with a former partner – and thereby improve their individual relationships with their children. Many participants reported that tips and suggestions from other group members had proved successful. Such incidents validated the suggestions of the individuals, and confirmed the group solidarity and identity as caring people seeking to manage their own very difficult situations.

We present two case studies to demonstrate some of the outcomes which people have reported. The first case emphasised the difficulties inherent in cross-cultural marriages:

The participant’s former wife’s cultural background was very regimented and she liked things done in very particular ways. However, he was very relaxed about (indeed, almost indifferent to) concepts of time and regularity. During the second workshop, he reported that there had been a significant deterioration in his relationship with his former wife. He had taken the children to a street festival during their contact visit, and returned them over an hour late. The man had great difficulty in accepting that his wife had ‘just cause’ to be extremely angry. The group suggested a number of approaches which the man might make in reassessing the situation.

Within two weeks, this man reported that he had not only resolved the issue of time-keeping while the children were on contact visits but also, by approaching this issue from a different perspective, he had opened a dialogue with his former wife — and they had negotiated a full property settlement between themselves, and only needed to seek legal assistance for confirmation of the appropriate Orders.

A number of other participants commented on how relationships with former partners have been improved as a result of the issues, approaches, and strategies that had been discussed during the workshops.

However, merely acknowledging the concept of changing attitudes does not necessarily translate into positive action — as this second case study demonstrates:

One woman appeared to take the workshops very seriously, and provided some very insightful comments on a number of issues. She stated that she was particularly moved by a scene in the video which showed a mother almost dragging a child back to the car after a contact visit in her haste to get away from her former partner’s house. The woman advised the group that she had resolved to alter a number of aspects of her relationship with her former partner.

The woman's former partner attended the next course and seemed to make a number of 'quiet' changes, especially in accepting the importance of the child having a good relationship with both parents. He requested mediation with his former wife to resolve a number of issues.

During the mediation sessions, both parents agreed to certain courses of action. However, despite all outward appearances of accepting the need for change, the woman's anger is such that she has yet to abide by any of the agreements. So far, cooperative parenting remains an unattainable goal for this couple.

Conclusions

The formative evaluation indicates:

- that, although this programme is very useful, it is not sufficient of itself. In most cases, people require continuing support and guidance as they seek to re-establish their lives and their new post-separation parenting roles, and
- the programme appears to offer significant potential to ameliorate some of the difficulties which couples find when adjusting to post-separation parenting and in managing the intricacies concerning issues of residency and contact.

Future Developments

There are a number of possible future developments which we are currently considering. These include:

- providing workshops at Community and Family Centres in various parts of the metropolitan area. These workshops will enhance access for a wider clientele, and may include both day and evening groups (depending on demand), and
- providing some form of continuing support to the parents.

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